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FM AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6053
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 1710
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1100
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 0935
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1333
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0730

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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Disputed election sparks violence in Aceh

11. (U) This is a joint Medan - Jakarta message.

12. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please handle accordingly.

13. (SBU) Summary: Clashes broke out at the inauguration of the new regent for Southeast Aceh District on September 1. A dozen demonstrators were arrested, 16 people were injured, and a local government office was torched. At the center of the conflict is a former regent who has refused to accept defeat in an election. The violence is localized and does not threaten the peace accord. End Summary.

Turbulence in SE Aceh

14. (U) On September 1, Governor Irwandi Yusuf installed Hasanuddin Beruh (Sanu) as the new regent (the highest level local official) of Southeast Aceh District (Agara). Despite the presence of more than 200 riot police (Brimob), the event was marred by violence when a mob of several thousand seeking to disrupt the event clashed with police. By the end of the day, the budget and planning office had been burned, a dozen demonstrators had been detained, and 16 people--including six police officers--had been injured. The situation returned to normal on September 2. The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) played no role in the conflict. (Note: GAM and the Indonesian government signed a peace accord in August 2005.)

15. (U) The violence was not wholly unexpected. Ever since the December 2007 local elections, demonstrations and conflict have been commonplace in the district. The conflict has intensified during the past several months, however. Since July, several government offices, a primary school, and a market have been burned and the regent's office was attacked with a hand grenade.

A Tarnished Former Regent

16. (SBU) Observers uniformly blame the violence on former regent Armen Desky. When he was regent, Desky and his family treated the district like a fiefdom, according to contacts, and members of the clan occupied every significant government position in the district. Opponents accuse Desky of looting the budget by steering government contracts to firms controlled by his family and he has been directly implicated in several major illegal logging cases.

17. (SBU) Despite his murky reputation, Desky was a leading candidate in the December 2007 local elections because of his seemingly tight control over the district and his campaign's very deep pockets. According to election day vote counts at polling stations, however,

Sanu won the election soundly, receiving more than 25 percent of the vote in the multi-candidate field.

A Disputed Election

18. (SBU) Several weeks after the election, district-level election officials reported results which had implausibly shifted in favor of Desky. Observers and journalists cried foul, and the provincial election commission ordered that all ballots be sent to Banda Aceh for a recount. Election officials in Banda Aceh ultimately declared Sanu the winner.

19. (U) Having lost the battle with the provincial election commission, pro-Desky district-level election officials turned to the courts. A local court found in favor of Desky, but this ruling was eventually overturned by the provincial court in Banda Aceh. In early August, the Ministry of Home Affairs ordered Sanu's installation as regent.

Localized Conflict

10. (SBU) According to reports, Desky and his supporters still refuse to acknowledge that he lost the election. This means that the new regent will face continued intransigence and probably more turbulence. Given that GAM is not involved and the GOI is taking a largely positive role in trying to tamp down the tension, the situation in SE Aceh--while unstable--does not threaten the peace accord.

HUME